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## ART. IX.—CRITICAL NOTICES.

- 1.—1. *Songs of Innocence and Experience, with other Poems.* By W. BLAKE. London: B. M. Pickering. 1866. Fcap. 8vo. pp. xii., 108.
2. *Poetical Sketches.* By WILLIAM BLAKE. Now first reprinted from the Original Edition of 1783. Edited and prefaced by Richard Herne Shepherd. London: B. M. Pickering. 1868. Fcap. 8vo. pp. xiv., 96.
3. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.* [London: J. C. Hotten. 1868. Sm. 4to. pp. 27.]

THESE three volumes are the most recent fruit of the revival of Blake's fame, both as poet and artist, which dates from the publication of Gilchrist's "Life of Blake," in 1863. During the last six years Blake has been a "fancy" with many people who had before hardly known his name; but the peculiar characteristics of his genius are such as to make him "caviare to the general." With two classes, however, he is likely to hold a high place permanently: with the mystics, as the most spiritual, intense, and imaginative of English mystics; and with artists, and true lovers of art, as painter and poet, with a genius of a curiously individual stamp, and as pure and lofty as it was original. Among modern artists, Blake forms a class by himself. With great inequalities, alike in conception and execution, his work is instinct with a spirit which distinguishes it from that of any of his predecessors or contemporaries. "William Blake, his mark," ineffaceably stamps every production of his pencil or his pen. In his highest reach of imagination he has never been surpassed; in the perfection of his technical execution at its best he is one of the great masters.

But the qualities of Blake's genius have been so much discussed of late years, that, tempting as the subject is, and imperfect, in our judgment, as the treatment of it has been, we refrain from entering on it, and confine ourselves to the simpler task of giving an account of the books before us.

In spite of some obvious defects, Mr. Gilchrist's "Life," with Mr. Rossetti's reprint of selections from Blake's poems and other writings, in the second volume of the "Life," will not only be hereafter the main source of information in regard to Blake's career and works, but will, in fact, supply all that is needed for a tolerably just conception of the nature and limits of his genius. Mr. Swinburne's wordy and pretentious volume ("William Blake: a Critical Essay") has no value ex-

cept that which it derives from the extracts it contains from some of Blake's unpublished writings, and the fac-similes with which it is illustrated of a few of his designs in colors.

The larger part of Blake's poems, including most of his early "Poetical Sketches," and of the "Songs of Innocence and of Experience," as well as "Poems hitherto Unpublished," were given by Mr. Rossetti, and it might seem as if a reprint of them were superfluous. But the student of Blake, touched with enthusiasm for his genius, will be grateful to Mr. Pickering for the publication of the two little volumes in which he gives an exact reprint of the poems as they were originally printed or engraved, save that the spelling is modernized, and includes a few that Mr. Rossetti apparently did not think worthy of preservation.

The text of some of the poems in this edition varies more or less from that in Mr. Rossetti's volume, and in the preface to each of these reprints the editor speaks with more severity than was needed of the arbitrary changes made by Mr. Rossetti. For the most part, however, the differences in the text are very slight, chiefly metrical or grammatical, — Blake, like some of the great elder poets, holding himself *super grammaticam*, — and only in rare instances, which may be accounted for by Mr. Rossetti's access to Blake's manuscript, do they show any essential variation in the sense or form.

It would be difficult to overestimate the force and originality of Blake's poetical genius. It is marvellous that a youth born in 1757, in the very depth of the stagnation of English poetry, should, before his twentieth year, have written such a poem as that in the "Poetical Sketches" addressed to the Muses, or the song beginning,

" My silks and fine array,  
My smiles and languish'd air  
By love are driven away."

Blake's sensitive and imaginative soul felt the earliest breath of the reviving spirit of Nature in poetry, and his torch was the first to be re-lighted at her altar. He was the first to restore truth and simplicity to poetry, and was in this respect the forerunner of Wordsworth and of Burns. His "Poetical Sketches" were all written in the years from 1768 to 1777, though not published till 1783. The "Songs of Innocence" appeared in 1789, and the "Songs of Experience" in 1794. Cowper's first volume of "Poems" came out in 1782; Burns's "Poems in the Scottish Dialect" were published in 1786. It was not till 1793 that Wordsworth's "Evening Walk" appeared.

Even in Blake's early poems an exquisite sensibility to Art is as apparent as his truth to Nature. In his best pieces, such as those to which we just now referred, it is very manifest in the beauty of their

form and the sweetness of their music. But in these juvenile pieces his art is often imperfect, and his full mastery is shown only in his later work, especially in some of the "Songs of Innocence," which were engraved, and had such publication as Blake could give to them, in 1789, when he was thirty-two years old. In the best and most characteristic of these poems there is the perfect simplicity of natural feeling expressed with an art exquisitely appropriate, and manifesting in its own simplicity the true temper of the artist.

It is in the "Songs of Experience," engraved five years later, that the greatest differences in the texts occur; and for the sake of gratifying the curiosity of the reader who may not have the two editions before him, we print the most commonly known of Blake's poems, "The Tiger," giving the text as it stands in Mr. Pickering's volume, and noting at the side the various readings supplied by Mr. Rossetti.

"Tiger, tiger, burning bright In the forests of the night, What immortal hand or eye Could frame thy fearful symmetry ?	Framed
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"In what distant deeps or skies Burnt the fire of thine eyes ? On what wings dare he aspire ? What the hand dare seize the fire ?	Burned that fire within dared dared
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"And what shoulder and what art Could twist the sinews of thy heart ? And when thy heart began to beat, What dread hand and what dread feet ?	When formed thy
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"What the hammer ? what the chain ? In what furnace was thy brain ? What the anvil ? what dread grasp Dare its deadly terrors clasp ?	δ Knit thy strength and forged thy brain ? Dared thy
--	--

"When the stars threw down their spears,  
And watered heaven with their tears,  
Did He smile His work to see ?  
Did He who made the lamb make thee ?

"Tiger, tiger, burning bright In the forests of the night, What immortal hand or eye Dare frame thy fearful symmetry ?"	[This stanza omitted.]
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A portion of the "Miscellaneous Poems," printed first by Mr. Rossetti from the manuscript, are reprinted by Mr. Pickering in connection with the "Songs of Innocence and-of Experience," also, according to a state-

ment in the Preface, from an original manuscript. Unfortunately, the best of those given by Mr. Rossetti are not found in the reprint, and their place is but poorly supplied by the wretched ballad of "Long John Brown and Little Mary Bell," and by some unimportant lines, prefixed, as a "Dedication to the Queen," to the edition of Blair's "Grave" which appeared with illustrations by Blake in 1808.

One little poem from the "Songs of Experience" — the only one omitted by Mr. Rossetti — seems worth preserving, slight as it is, as a specimen of Blake's imaginative personification of moral attributes. It is called —

"A DIVINE IMAGE.

"Cruelty has a human heart,  
And Jealousy a human face;  
Terror the human form divine,  
And Secrecy the human dress.

"The human dress is forged iron,  
The human form a fiery forge,  
The human face a furnace sealed,  
The human heart its hungry gorge."

A much more important publication than these two little volumes of reprinted poems, as exhibiting Blake's genius in one of its most peculiar forms, and as supplying illustrations of it not to be elsewhere found, is the fac-simile of his "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," of which a small number of copies were lately issued. Very few copies exist of the original edition of this extraordinary work. The fac-simile, which is admirably executed, was made from a fine copy in the possession of Lord Houghton. Its pages are engraved, and both illuminated and illustrated, with designs in color, which are highly finished by hand, in imitation of the original drawing. Every page is illuminated so richly, and with such variety of delicate detail, that even the engraved letter-press seems as if done by hand. In addition to this illumination, there are, in the space of the twenty-seven pages, thirteen large designs, — that on the title-page occupying the whole page, the others filling half or a third of the page. The subjects of most of these designs have only a remote and obscure relation to the text; but in themselves, though by no means equalling in power or depth of conception Blake's finest work, such as his "Job," they display great vividness of fancy, and show his wild and mystical imagination in full play. From the fac-simile a just impression can be gained, by those to whom the originals are not accessible, not only of one of Blake's most characteristic modes of work, but also of the style of his drawing, the method of his coloring, and the exercise of his fancy in its more mystical moods. Mr. Gil-

christ speaks of the original as "perhaps the most curious and significant, while it is certainly the most daring in conception and gorgeous in illustration, of all Blake's works." The large extracts which he gives from it are ample to afford a general notion of the scope of the brief treatise. There is in it a sad mingling of fine sense and fine poetry with — what at least seems like — utter confusion of mind and pure bathos. The idea of the book, so far as a prevailing idea can be traced through its obscurities, is indicated by its title, "*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," — which expresses one of the philosophic notions that had taken deepest hold on Blake. It was his view, that without contraries there is no progression, — that from these contraries spring what the religious (by whom he means the superstitious and false interpreters of true religion) call Good and Evil; that "Good is the passive that obeys reason, Evil is the active springing from energy," — each without the other being imperfect, and even Heaven and Hell needing reconciliation and union, "for everything that lives is Holy." But this idea is discernible, in "*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," only through a cloud of mystical darkness, and does not afford a sufficient clew for the interpretation of many difficult and obscure passages. Blake, indeed, both in some parts of this volume, and in other of his mystical writings, seems to have written after a manner which the spiritual mediums of later days have rendered only too familiar. Any one gifted with common resources of mind can, if he chooses, with very little practice, throw himself into a state in which writing of this sort becomes possible, if not easy. Abstaining from any conscious exercise of will in the control of his thoughts, allowing them to take their own course, freeing his mind as far as possible from preoccupation, he will soon find himself capable of mystic utterances, which, if he be in any degree a versifier, will readily take, without conscious effort on his part, metrical form, and which will be purely worthless and utterly meaningless, or will possess some worth and more or less depth of meaning, according to his original faculties, his culture, and the established usual order of his mind. The mass of the mediums who profess to speak in a state of trance or possession, having neither native gifts, nor much culture, nor trained minds, produce but silly trash and dull stupidities; but Blake had imagination and spirituality of vision; and even when he, to his own bewilderment, and to the lowering of his genius, abjured command over his thoughts, and yielded himself to the wayward impulses of unchecked fancy, even then he could not divest himself of the qualities of genius; and his mystic utterances, when most remote from intelligibility, are swollen with a vague grandeur, and are now and then interrupted by passages of genuine spiritual discernment,

and illuminated by clear flashes of redeeming imagination. In "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," the contrast between the will-o'-the-wisp uncertainty of meaning in some parts with the sharply defined sense of others is very striking. Blake's common sense, no less than his celestial sense, is shown, for instance, in a very high degree, in the Proverbs of Hell, which he says he thus collected:—

"As I was walking among the fires in Hell, delighted with the enjoyments of Genius, which to angels look like torment and insanity, I collected some of their proverbs, thinking, that, as the sayings used in a nation mark its character, so the Proverbs of Hell show the nature of infernal wisdom better than any descriptions of buildings or garments."

Many of the proverbs enforce Blake's notion of the real heavenliness of Hell. What can be sweeter than this: "The soul of sweet delight cannot be defiled"? or than this: "To create a little flower is the labor of ages"? What better precept than this: "The most sublime act is to set another before you"? What wiser one than this: "If others had not been foolish, we should be so"? or than this: "Everything possible to be believed is an image of truth"? But many of the proverbs display a shrewdness of worldly wisdom which may indicate their devilish origin. In Blake's time it could only have been a devil who would have ventured to say, "Damn braces! bless relaxes!"—and only from Hell could have proceeded such a saying as "Prisons are built with stones of Law, brothels with bricks of Religion." There is a touch of wickedness in "The road of Excess leads to the palace of Wisdom," and in its counterpart, "You never know what is enough, unless you know what is more than enough." But on the whole, the Proverbs of Hell have nothing in them that would prove Hell to be a bad place.

There is, perhaps, nothing finer among the designs which adorn this most interesting volume than that upon the title-page, in which two spirits, drawn with an intensity of expressive action such as Blake alone could represent, are seen, one flying from the fires of Hell, the other from the clouds of Heaven, to lock themselves in each other's arms in eager embrace. As a whole, the designs are inferior, both in conception and in color, to the best of Blake's work. We regret to learn that the artist by whom the hand-work in the fac-simile was executed has lately died. The volume must soon become rare. For those who desire thorough acquaintance with Blake's genius, it is a delightful and indispensable supplement to the volumes of his *Life and Writings*.